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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Office of Current Intelligence  
12 July 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Uncertainty in the Venezuelan Presidential Election

1. The forthcoming presidential election in Venezuela--scheduled for November--is expected to be an important test of the viability of representative government in that country.
2. Raul Leoni, the candidate selected by President Betancourt's Democratic Action (AD) Party, now seems to have the best chance to win, but several significant factors make the outcome of the election anything but certain. Leoni, president and a founder of the AD party, is universally identified with his party's doctrinaire line, a factor which sharply limits his voting strength outside AD. In addition, the 57-year-old Leoni's close association with present administration policies is likely to alienate those young voters who are dissatisfied with the government. Failure of democratically oriented forces to take into account the potential dangers implicit in the uncertain electoral picture could result in the installation of a successor government with policies and attitudes inimical to US objectives.
3. According to the Venezuelan constitution, Betancourt cannot succeed himself. Moreover, neither Leoni nor any other potential candidate commands the widespread prestige and support enjoyed by Betancourt. Even with solid party support, an AD candidate cannot be assured of election unless he is also backed by the Christian Socialist Party (COPEI), partner with AD in the governing coalition. AD has lost congressional strength since 1958 as a result of serious splits.

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4. Thus far AD does not appear to be convinced that it needs COEPI's support. On the contrary, there is considerable pressure within the AD to "go it alone." As for COPEI, there is an increasing likelihood that it will run party leader Rafael Caldera or some other candidate on a separate ticket.

5. Another factor contributing to the uncertainty is the expected candidacy of Wolfgang Larrazabal--an opportunist and politically dangerous figure. Larrazabal was runner-up to Betancourt in the 1958 election, polling 34.6 percent of the total vote to Betancourt's 49.2 percent. In 1958 the Communist Party was only one of several extremist groups which endorsed Larrazabal. Larrazabal probably will either run as the joint candidate of a major opposition grouping or throw his support behind Jovito Villalba, candidate of the Democratic Republican Union (URD), the largest opposition party.

6. There have been no national or important state or local elections in five years to draw upon for indications of changes in Venezuelan voting patterns. Perhaps the most significant unknown in the coming election will be the attitude of the more than one half million young voters--20-25 percent of the estimated total electorate--who will be voting for the first time.

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